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Citation for published version:

Stein, E 2019, Historical sociology and Middle East international relations. in S Akbarzadeh (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*. 1 edn, Routledge, pp. 46-58.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229591>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781315229591](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315229591)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in 'Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East' on 05/04/2019, available online:
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315229591>

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Abstract: Regional conflicts persist due to states' mutual interests in reproducing particular configurations of domestic, as much as international, power. Societal movements both within and outside of states may constitute allies as much as obstacles in this endeavor and considered analytically to belong to the state and its foreign policy apparatus. Historical sociology offers a clear picture of regional conflict by bringing together state, society, regional, and international levels. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood became part of the state's ideological state apparatus, helping to externalize domestic opposition. It contributed to upholding the US security agenda in the region at the cost of helping to fuel regional and global jihadism. In Iran, Islamists constituted the conservative core of the state rather than an adjunct. The regime confronted a more organized state and civil society opposition than was the case in Egypt, one that would be greatly empowered by strengthening of links with the West. As such, alignment with regional resistance movements became integral to the structure of power in Iran.

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Historical sociology and Middle East international relations

Ewan Stein

The Middle East is often considered synonymous with endemic conflict. Alongside its apparent imperviousness to democratization, the persistence of conflict at both the inter-state and sub-state level has contributed to the view that the region is somehow ‘exceptional’. Some have attributed the region’s exceptional propensity to authoritarianism and conflict to the overweening influence of religious and ethnic identities and their incongruency with modernity. Others have posited that enduring legacies of colonialism and dependency have given rise to authoritarian nationalist states, on the one hand, and anti-Western opposition movements, on the other. Although this chapter does not claim that the Middle East is exceptional, it nevertheless asserts that the persistence of authoritarianism and international conflict are closely linked and, indeed, mutually reinforcing. It focuses on clarifying the evolving stances of Egypt and Iran toward overarching regional conflicts. The positions of each state have undergone considerable transformation, and in opposite directions, since the 1970s. Until 1973, Egypt led opposition to US imperialism and Zionism, as well as to pro-Western monarchies in the Gulf. With the signing of the peace treaty, however, Egypt withdrew from the Arab-Israeli conflict and aligned with the US and Saudi Arabia. Iran, conversely, was America’s staunchest ally and enjoyed good relations with Israel and Arab monarchies until 1979. Just as Egypt was making peace with former foes, revolutionary Iran assumed leadership of a regional struggle against US imperialism, Zionism, and “reactionary” Arab regimes.

Explanations for regional antagonisms, as well as for periods of reconciliation, have suffered from a narrow definition of the state and ill-defined conception of society. Although a number of more critical approaches to IR and foreign policy analysis have addressed this bias by foregrounding societal movements, they have not incorporated their findings into more general theorization about how inter-state, state-society, and inter-societal relationships combine to shape regional order in the Middle East. As Fred Halliday enjoined, while historical sociological insights have been central to a range of Middle East studies academic concerns,

the challenge is to apply these insights, from international relations and Middle East studies alike, to the history of the region, to its states and ideologies and to the particular combination of political, security and socio-economic forces that constitute the Middle East as a whole.

This chapter argues that this ‘combination’ consists, on the one hand, in regimes’ mutual interests in reproducing particular configurations of power and, on the other, in the role societal movements play both in supporting and opposing them in this endeavor. In elaborating this argument, I propose that some so-called non-state actors be recognized as belonging to the ideological state apparatuses of states. It first reviews existing attempts from a range of theoretical perspectives to conceptualize Middle Eastern order, before sketching out an alternative historical sociology of regional order.

Realist approaches

For structural realists, regional order is a function of the balance of power. The realist paradigm encompasses a range of approaches, but all agree that ‘power is the currency of international politics’. Structural (or neo-) realism, the dominant approach during, and substantially shaped by, the Cold War, ‘ignore[s] cultural differences among states as well as differences in regime type, mainly because the international system creates the same basic incentives for all great powers’.

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Structural realists maintain that power is essential to the maintenance of security, and thus states (which are the only theoretically significant actors in international affairs) balance or bandwagon with other states in order to preserve their security.² Failure to balance, or bandwagon, against power results in insecurity and conflict.

Although in its ‘pure’ form structural realism ignores unit-level variable factors, the canonical realist treatment of the Middle East is that of Stephen Walt, who uses the region as a case study to modify balance of power theory. To explain what seemed to be anomalous alignments, Walt introduces an epistemological dimension to Waltz’s classic statement of structural realism in claiming that states do not balance power *per se*, but rather balance against *threats*. Walt takes ideology, perceptions, and rhetoric seriously as constituents of regional order. Gause, however, notes that in Walt’s work, ‘the process by which states identify threats is undetermined. There seems to be an assumption that the source of greatest threat is obvious to decision-makers (and analysts)’.³ Walt does not ask *why* some states threaten others, *how* states identify threats against which to balance, or why they choose particular allies with which to align. Gause views ‘ideological and political threats’ to the legitimacy of regimes as the most salient drivers of regional conflict.

Another realist author who has adapted neorealism to the realities of international behavior is Thomas Juneau. Although dealing with the foreign policy of one state, rather than regional dynamics as a whole, Juneau’s work provides an explanation for why one pivotal state, Iran, has consistently cleaved to an antagonistic vision of regional order. In a neoclassical realist study, Juneau sets out to explain why Iran “squandered” the opportunity after 9/11 to pursue a potentially profitable rapprochement with the US and end its “suboptimal” foreign policy. Juneau explains the anomaly in terms of Iran’s “unconventional” power resources, path dependency, and the strength of internal factions.

Juneau develops his argument via a more nuanced conception of a state’s power resources than a straightforward neorealist accounting of material assets would allow. Iran’s power resources, for Juneau, are weighted toward ‘unconventional and intangible elements:

asymmetric military capabilities, the appeal of Iran's rejectionist model, and alliances with nonstate actors'.⁴ The sources of Iranian power thus encourage foreign policies geared toward burnishing its image as a confrontational state and maintaining influence over armed groups that can "spoil" US designs for the region. They form the basis of Iran's power as an international actor: 'The appeal of Iran's rejectionism', for example, 'contributes to its power because it provides Tehran with opportunities to constrain the margin of maneuver of Arab states aligned with the United States'.⁵ Iran's power, and hence ability to disrupt US-dominated order in the Middle East, is thus heavily dependent on alliances and societal perceptions external to the state. This interpretation of the role that identity plays in influencing *other* states and society mirrors that of constructivism, discussed as follows, which also views ideational factors as elements of a state's external power projection.

Juneau explains Iran's "irrational" strategy of pursuing regional insecurity rather than material gain through realignment with the US as a result of path dependency. Specifically, the dominance of a conservative faction in Iranian politics has imbued domestic institutions with revisionist identity. This constrains policy:

by limiting the terms of political debate or through the built-in biases of these institutions and their shaping of policy-making. This contributes to explaining the path-dependency of the causal chain: identity has a strong causal effect that is difficult to reorient. Importantly, when this policy is suboptimal, the resulting negative consequences are perpetuated.⁶

The concept of path dependency enables neoclassical realist theory to explain the persistence of "sub-optimal" antagonistic foreign policy, or policy that would seem to jeopardize the state's interests. Realists, as Reus-Smit has noted, judge states' interest in maximizing power to be unproblematic.⁷ If their policies do not respond to the need to maximize power in the international system, then reasons for this failing must be found within the workings or composition of the state, which neoclassical realism provides. While Iran is no different from

other regional powers in seeking to shape its regional environment in line with its interests, those interests are undefined.

Another variant of realism that incorporates a domestic dimension to explain alignments is Stephen David's theory of omnibalancing. Under this rubric, regimes in the Third World conclude alignments with other states in order to balance both internal and external threats. One of the examples David uses to illustrate his theory is Sadat's alignment with the US:

The Egyptian military, workers, intellectuals, and students had grown increasingly impatient with the continuing stalemate and sought to force the Egyptian leader to regain the territories from Israel. For Sadat to deal with the threats from the Egyptian groups, he had to force Israel to return the lands it had seized. **8**

Omnibalancing, however, adopts a largely episodic perspective on the provenance of domestic threats, which makes it difficult to discern any historical patterns in regional order. In the Egyptian example, David takes societal demands for the restoration of the occupied Sinai at face value, without considering the deeper political and economic grievances that drove popular protests. Nor does he consider how foreign policy was effective in ameliorating them – which, given the eruption of bread riots in 1977 and Sadat's assassination four years later, it arguably was not. If regional order consists in multiple episodic processes of “omnibalancing”, why have palliative alignments persisted for long after the supposed internal threats have been suppressed? As Allinson has noted, the theory of omnibalancing does not explain why particular allies are chosen over others or why regimes face threats. It rather imports the ahistorical neorealist model inside the state. **9**

Constructivism and the English School

Constructivists, as well as scholars of the English School, view conflict primarily in ideational rather than material terms, stressing the importance of international institutions and normative

frameworks. Thus, for Michael Barnett, Arab politics are ‘symbolic politics’. Insecurity and conflict result from the ineffective use of symbolic power: ‘More often than not Arab leaders deployed symbolic power, not military power, to enhance their security and control each other’s foreign policies’.¹⁰ Inter-state conflict in the Middle East has thus revolved around the definition of, and congruency with, the norms that constitute regional order. In the 1950s and 1960s, states came into conflict over their congruency with the norms of “Arabism”, which manifested dissatisfaction with the international system, particularly its central institution of state sovereignty and the subjection of the region – and broader Third World – to Western imperialist domination. Although much of this conflict was ideational as opposed to material, it nevertheless “symbolically entrapped” states into pursuing apparently reckless or risky foreign policies in order to bolster their Arabist credentials. When such policies failed, as with the collapse of the UAR in 1961 and, most dramatically, the Israeli defeat of Arab militaries in 1967, Arabism’s normative force gave way to the status quo norm of sovereignty.

Regional antagonisms thus arise, for constructivists, from the alleged “incongruency” between the norms of sovereignty, which reflect international system satisfaction on the part of regional actors, and those of “Arabism”, which manifest system dissatisfaction.¹¹ For Barnett, normative forces evolve and influence policies through inter-state interactions, but are ultimately rooted in state identities, which he argues are established through domestic processes of legitimation. The rise of statist state identities reflected public disillusionment with Arabist foreign policies and enabled reorientation toward the West, including through accommodation with Israel.

This dichotomous conception of regional (dis)order is mirrored in the English School of IR, which identifies binary distinctions within the ‘primary institutions’ of the region, which constitute ‘durable and recognised patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by the members of inter-state societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles’.¹² Primary institutions divide into “master” and “derivative” institutions. The former are global

norms (such as sovereignty, diplomacy or territoriality), whereas derivative institutions reflect how these norms are “applied” at the regional level.

The English School adds nuance to Barnett’s constructivist framework by stressing the historical interaction between master and derivative institutions. The latter are not necessarily diametrically opposed to the former, which opens the possibility that states may cooperate, rather than clash, over the definition of regional norms. In this vein, and drawing on the work of English School theorist Hedley Bull, Amitav Acharya develops the concept of ‘norm localisation’, which expresses the way in which global norms are adapted and framed to resonate with local cultures.¹³ The English School in general has been criticized for its Eurocentrism, in that the norms of global society are primary, with local agents free only to reinterpret them or reject them out of hand.¹⁴ Acharya later advanced the notion of ‘Norm subsidiarity’, which accords more agency to regional actors and ‘concerns the process whereby local actors develop new rules, offer new understandings of global rules or reaffirm global rules in the regional context’, in order to improve their position relative to global powers.¹⁵ The theory of norm subsidiarity helps explain why they might orient themselves against, and hence come into conflict with, the great powers, but it does not specify how subsidiarity serves the interests of the regimes and other actors that articulate them and struggles to explain why some regional actors develop and embrace subsidiary normative frameworks whereas others simply “localise” global ones.

This is because of the constructivism that lies at the core of Acharya’s conceptual framework. Acharya’s brief discussion of norm subsidiarity in the Middle East draws on the work of Michael Barnett and equates subsidiary norms in the region with those of Arabism. In rather circular terms, he argues that “system-dissatisfied” states are more likely to promote norm subsidiarity than “system-satisfied” ones and hints that this dissatisfaction emerges not from real abuse or neglect but from unwillingness to take advantage of externally available resources:

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As great powers are normally expected to possess the resources to offer sufficient material incentives (including security protection and economic aid) to lure weak states into their ambit, their failure to attract the desired level of weak state representation in institutions created by them would indicate nonmaterial variables at work, including normative forces. **16**

System-dissatisfied states thus shun external offers of support because to accept it would violate regional normative expectations, which in turn perpetuates their dissatisfaction.

The work of Barnett and Acharya thus ultimately locates the roots of inter-state conflict in the domestic sphere, via a conception of conflicting state identities that are ultimately determined at the societal level. But the mechanisms through which domestic support for statist or Arabist identities (that is, norm localization versus subsidiarity) translates into shifts in state identity and thus conflictual versus amicable foreign policies are not specified.

Similar omissions are found in other constructivist IR scholarship on the Middle East. Buzan and Waever's exposition of the Middle East as a Regional Security Complex (RSC) considers the domestic level only insofar as it produces identity conflicts. Otherwise, the Middle East RSC has produced 'rather Westphalian-looking interests and (in)security dynamics at the regional level', which have been 'driven by a traditional agenda of territorial disputes, ideological competitions, power and status rivalries, and ethnic and cultural divisions'. **17**

In relation to the domestic level, Buzan and Waever conclude that 'with some notable exceptions . . . domestic turbulence in the Middle East does not determine the international security agenda'. The exceptions, for them, are the Kurdish question and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the latter of which 'is in some ways the key to the whole Middle Eastern RSC', becoming 'the main driving force of the antagonism between Israel and the wider Arab and Islamic worlds'. The authors note that 'Arab nationalist, Islamist, and Zionist sentiments at the level of the "street" have generated serious domestic resistance in many states to Arab-Israeli deals', but do not elaborate on just how this has constrained foreign policy. In arguing that 'domestic insecurities were largely contained within the framework of the state system', **18**

Buzan and Waever accept Barnett's reading that Arabist norms have declined relative to statist ones, but they do not explain how sentiments on the 'level of the street' translate into the regional security agenda, or how some states, such as Egypt, have been able to disregard these sentiments and conclude deals with Israel.

The political economy of regionalism

Etel Solingen's work on regionalism offers some clues into the ways in which societal sentiments, mediated by social movements, might influence the level of conflict in a region. Solingen seeks to provide 'explanations for decades of Middle East wars and enduring rivalries in the inter-Arab, Arab – Israeli, and Arab – Iranian arenas; for cooperative Arab – Israeli breakthroughs in the early 1990s and reactive responses to them'.¹⁹ She argues that the predominance of inward-looking or "statist-nationalist" coalitions in Middle East states drives regional antagonism. These coalitions have consolidated power in the region partially through rentierism, which enabled them to buy off discontent, and partially through the pursuit of antagonistic foreign policies:

Their grand strategy, in its purest form, hinges wholly on the interests of state industry and ancillary inward-looking military-industrial sectors, as well as of ethnic, religious, and nationalist groups threatened by internationalization. Regional insecurity and competition helps sustain these coalitions in power whereas rising regional cooperation has the potential of eroding their resources and undermining their objectives.²⁰

Solingen provides a compelling picture of the interaction between coalitions' domestic power bases, which she sees as both material and ideological, and their foreign policy interests. This adds depth to constructivist and English School accounts of regional order and does not take interests for granted as realists do. However, Solingen's account fails to explain why

antagonisms take the ideological form that they do and understates the pacific effects of internationalizing coalitions. Most importantly, Solingen's framework does not adequately define or explain the orientation of states like Egypt, which moved from statist-nationalism to crony capitalism rather than internationalism, but which nevertheless became bastions of regional inter-state stability. Solingen notes that 'Since Sadat's inception of a new [economic] model . . . Egypt never initiated war against Israel again'.²¹ Yet the Egyptian military remained the dominant institution within the Egyptian state and pursued a highly monopolistic domestic agenda, despite losing some ground to business interests from the 1990s.²² Although paying lip service to neoliberal values, Egypt's political economy remained a closed shop under Sadat and Mubarak. Yet the peace with Israel has held for over four decades. Like Juneau, Solingen attributes the persistence of conflict in the Middle East, despite the economic transformations of the 1970s and 1990s, to "path dependency". The statist-nationalist policies of the 1950s and 1960s continued to influence state behavior in subsequent decades: 'Clearly, political forces unleashed by Nasserism and rentier economies constituted formidable barriers to change'.

Solingen concludes that 'declining oil windfalls in the 1980s denied Middle East leaders resources available erstwhile to avoid adjustment, yet path-dependent legacies burdened change. The Middle East remains the region least integrated into global trade and finance after sub-Saharan Africa'.²³ Unfortunately, she provides little insight into how these path dependencies constrained change or why, given the failure of states to open up their economies, they have remained at (albeit cold) peace with Israel since 1973. She also homogenizes Middle Eastern states: all ruling statist-nationalist coalitions pursue externalization policies to remain in power, thus sustaining a conflictual regional order. Her framework cannot explain why Egypt withdrew from conflict with Israel in the absence of an internationalizing coalition or why Iran, which like Egypt moved from statist economics to crony capitalism, remained embroiled in it. Most importantly, society, which drove the populist models in the 1950s and 1960s, largely disappears from the explanatory picture in subsequent decades in favor of an explanation based on path dependency.

A major problem with the paradigms outlined earlier in seeking to explain alignment decisions is whether states, regimes, or ruling coalitions have an interest in balancing against anything, or whether conflicts over normative frameworks actually flow from states' interests in coercing and entrapping other states. The theory of omnibalancing, and Solingen's reading of foreign policy "externalization" accept that alignments and foreign policy may serve internal purposes, but they are either painted as episodic palliatives or uniformly applicable to all statist-nationalist regimes.

A second, closely related, issue is that all of these conceptions of regional order prioritize elite-level political considerations, with societal factors left ill-defined. The role of society is either bracketed as the Arab or Muslim "street", which negatively acts to deter the pro-Israeli or pro-Western foreign policy that states would otherwise regard as "optimal", or it is deemed to have been influential in the past, shaping political systems that have, due to path dependency, resisted change for decades. And, crucially, domestic-level conflicts and insecurities, whether in the form of societal insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, civil wars, or political oppression, are neglected due to a focus on elite-level dynamics.

Critical security studies

Critical security studies moves the "referent object" of security discourse from the state to society, thus providing a deeper interpretation of regional (dis)order. Walid Hazbun, for example, assesses the security concerns of societal groups like tribes and parties and highlights the role of social movements in providing security where states do not. Social movements not only helped to protect citizens against rapacious "insecurity-generating" states, but also spearheaded anti-imperialist movements, which often performed more effectively and thus gaining more legitimacy in this regard than states.

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The critical security agenda focuses the international relations debate on “internal” historical sociological dynamics, and links conflictual foreign policies with the influence of social movements. Thus, for Hazbun,

The radical Arab-nationalist states challenged the regional influence of the Western-backed conservative monarchies. But missing from many accounts in international relations is that regional Arab politics was also shaped by the socioeconomic changes that fostered ideological trends and social movements. “Street politics” became a force in shaping regional geopolitics. Radical nationalist and social-reformist trends mobilized the next generation, providing a support base for Egypt’s Nasser and other Arab-nationalist leaders who challenged Western-backed regimes and attempted to restructure the prevailing order. **24**

Hazbun’s account usefully combines history and sociology to demonstrate that “street politics”, or societal movements, need to be incorporated into the picture of IR in the Middle East. As Hazbun points out, ‘Across the region, in the eyes of many Arabs, it was nonstate actors through “resistance” movements against occupiers that came to represent successful models of political mobilization’. **25**

Pinar Bilgin adopts a similar society-focused approach to the question of Middle East regional security. She argues that the scholarly focus on state security reflects the concerns of the great powers and overlooks the state of insecurity in which most of the region’s inhabitants live. Bilgin, like Hazbun, takes seriously the security agendas of societal groups. Although departing from Barnett’s constructivist approach in adopting a bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, approach to regional security concerns, **26** however, Bilgin shares his view that state foreign policy has been constrained by discourses of Arabism: ‘although Arab policy-makers prioritised the security of their respective states, they nevertheless found it difficult to act in total defiance of the concerns voiced by other Arab actors that were formulated in terms of Arab national security’. **27** Bilgin’s conception of ‘Arab national security’ – formulated in supra-state terms

and with society as the referent object – equates to Barnett’s ‘norms of Arabism’. Although providing more detail on the social movements that elaborated pan-Arab and anti-imperialist discourses, Bilgin also locates the force of these discourses on the international, as opposed to domestic, level. Thus, ‘the policy-makers of conservative Arab states were sceptical of Nasser’s articulation of a broader conception of Arab national security and felt threatened by the emphasis he put on its societal dimension’. Citing Barnett, she concludes that ‘Nasser’s interventions were not military but “symbolic”; they were designed to use the influence over Arab public opinion to shape the practices of other governments’.

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Critical security studies explain how non-state actors became more “legitimate” than state ones, particularly in the context of the weakening of states that has allowed them to flourish. They also, in common here with neoclassical realism and constructivism, explore how some states continue to seek association with such movements in order to secure regional objectives. What is still missing from these critical security interventions is an explanation of how the security agendas of societal movements and those of states interrelate in ways that influence regional security dynamics as a whole. While societal security concerns are certainly of normative importance, their broader analytical significance remains unclear. In particular, the critical security research program does not answer Acharya and Juneau’s question about why some states exhibit system dissatisfaction and choose alignment with revisionist non-state actors rather than accepting more materially lucrative relationships with external powers.

Toward a historical sociology of Middle East regional order

The central limitation of all of the approaches to regional conflict and security outlined here is the sharpness of the distinction they draw between state and society, on the one hand, and the state, regional, and international environment, on the other. By treating each of these four realms as ontologically distinct, the state in much IR of the Middle East scholarship is both too shallow,

in that it is restricted to the ruler and his coterie, and too narrow, in that it is limited to Westphalian territoriality. Societal movements, relatedly, are considered to be either inherently oppositional to states or tools to be used by states seeking to deploy power internationally. I argue for a deepening of the concept of the state used in IR. As Hobson pointed out, the 'state-society complex'²⁹ came to include erstwhile independent social movements, which served as part of the state's overall ideological apparatus,³⁰ helping to perpetuate dependence, but producing often schizophrenic foreign or composite foreign policy orientations.

I also argue for a broadening of the concept of the state. In this vein, Hoffman and Cengil argue that 'reproductive strategies of states include, along with their foreign policy strategies, all state policies' and 'the Turkish state, as the locus of Turkey's foreign-policymaking, is not treated as an exclusive unitary agent, above and beyond the reach of other social forces, domestic and international'. Similarly, Aurora Sottimano and Emile Hokayem have demonstrated the extent to which association with Hizbullah and Hamas has constituted an integral part of the structure of power in Syria, rather than simply tools for furthering foreign policy objectives.³¹

Other examples of work which, like the aforementioned texts, views foreign policy as a primarily internal affair, include Workman's book on the social origins of the Iran-Iraq War and Allinson's application of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) to Jordanian foreign policy. Workman applies insights from critical war studies to highlight the domestic motivations of ruling coalitions vis-à-vis subaltern groups in each state: 'It was a war of two crisis-ridden societies'.³² Workman links the central assumption of realist IR, that states strive to protect and maximize their influence on the international plane, with the domestic support bases of regimes:

the Ba'th regime was suddenly handed the opportunity to emerge as the dominant power in the Gulf and enhance its prestige in the Arab world. Greater regional leverage would go a long way toward stabilizing the oil revenues – revenues that were increasingly crucial for the maintenance of the repressive state.³³

The repressive state, for Workman, uses foreign policy to maintain the subordination of a range of subaltern groups, including women and ethnic and sectarian minorities alongside excluded classes. Iraqi aspirations for regional domination primarily reflect the regime's concern with the reproduction of the unequal system atop which it sits. The link between "geopolitical" dynamics and state-society relations emerges clearly in Workman's analysis. The regime's external dependence on oil drove its quest for "regional paramountcy", which 'would go a long way toward giving the Ba'th regime the necessary influence to guide regional oil policy (in OPEC decision-making bodies) in predictable and safe directions'. ³⁴

Allinson similarly links Jordan's foreign policy to a deepened and expanded definition of the state in arguing that 'struggles over Jordan's external subsidy reflected more than just differences over aid but, in addition, conflicts over the way that aid structured the relationship of the state and certain social groups within it to the global capitalist system'. ³⁵ It 'integrates social and "international" explanation rather than one being subordinate to the other'. ³⁶ These analyses of foreign policy represent a fruitful step in deepening our understanding of the drivers of regionalist projects. As single case studies, they do not systematically explore how dynamics of state formation influence broader regional patterns, but the analysis is couched in an understanding of broader regional dynamics, particularly the perseverance of relatively stable antagonistic blocs.

Egypt and Iran: sociologies of antagonistic regionalism

With these broadened and deepened definitions of the state in mind, we can proceed to outline a historical sociology of regional order in the Middle East. The following section sketches the foreign policy trajectories of Egypt and Iran, states that "switched sides" in the enduring regional schism between revisionist and status quo powers. I suggest that the role of societal sentiments in driving both revisionist and status quo agendas must be understood in relation to the social and

institutional bases of regimes and domestic oppositions, on the one hand, and how external sources of material support encourage or threaten internal power hierarchies, on the other.

During the Nasser era, which most of the scholars discussed previously see as pivotal to the formation of Arabist revisionism, or a societal-based Arab security order, populist foreign policies, combined with socialist economic programs and a state ideological infrastructure (especially the Arab Socialist Union), neutralized internal threats to regimes from within and beyond the state. Anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist foreign policies in the name of an oppressed Arab people, whether of the “symbolic” or militarized variety, served the important purpose of externalizing domestic grievances to discredit internal regime rivals and pre-empt societal challenges from the left and the right. Externalization increased in importance as perceptions of domestic inclusivity and security declined. Iran during this period, conversely, was less active in promoting revisionist regional discourses due to its ability to count on substantial US security guarantees (demonstrated in Iran in 1953) and a relatively quiescent, if not wholly supportive, religious establishment. Iranian foreign policy until 1979 instead focused on demonstrating indispensability to the US as a guarantor of regional stability in the face of alleged communist threats in Iran, the Gulf, and the wider Middle East. Egypt’s “externalising” foreign policy was primarily directed inward, toward Egyptian society, whereas Iran’s was directed outward, toward the US.

During the 1970s, many states in the region faced increased domestic unrest linked to the declining capacity of welfare-based economies and the rise of crony capitalism. In Iran, the Shah’s regime faced resistance in 1963 and, on a much larger scale, from 1977, expressing ‘a deep, underlying frustration with the economic problems and the political system present in Iran, a frustration increased rather than offset by the rapid and chaotic socio-economic changes of the previous decade and a half’.³⁷ Frustration was compounded by mass resentment against the Shah’s pro-US orientation, which the regime was structurally unable to alter. The revolution of 1979, it followed, targeted the corruption and despotism of the Shah, as well as American influence in Iran and the region. Post-revolutionary Iran relied on anti-imperialist foreign policy,

particularly following the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, to externalize social opposition in a way the Shah's state, tethered as it was to the US, could not.

Similar pressures from below afflicted the Egyptian regime of Anwar Sadat. Frustration with economic inequality and exclusionary politics was not new in Egypt, but due to the economic restructuring and accompanying geopolitical realignment toward the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, dissatisfaction could also no longer be externalized through revisionist foreign policy agendas. Although the 1973 war was spun as a victory, bread riots shook Egypt in reaction to neoliberal reforms in 1977, and in 1981 Sadat was assassinated by jihadists who objected to the peace treaty with Israel. Social unrest was quelled by re-instating the withdrawn subsidies on bread, increased repression of the left and, importantly, the reinvigoration of political Islam as an arm of the state.

Egypt's migration from the revisionist to the pro-US camp has, as we have seen, been explained in terms of omnibalancing (Egypt needed the Sinai back and only the US could provide it), the consolidation of statist identity after the discrediting of Arabism from 1967, or the influence of a new more internationalizing ruling coalition. On closer scrutiny, none of these explanations is convincing. Egypt remained a staunch US ally long after the recovery of the Sinai. The societal movement that replaced Nasserism was political Islam, which was no less revisionist in its foreign policy discourse. And the state of Sadat and Mubarak was, if anything, more economically monopolistic and nationalistic than was that of Nasser. Egypt's ability to durably change its structural position within the regional order can be explained by adopting a deeper definition of the state. Although proscribed, the Muslim Brotherhood played a key role in absorbing societal opposition to the effects of economic restructuring, political exclusion, and dissatisfaction with Egypt's abandonment of revisionist foreign policy. The Sadat and Mubarak regimes encouraged the reformation of the Muslim Brotherhood and encouraged the growth of Salafism as instruments of foreign policy externalization. These movements should thus be considered as part of the Egyptian state ideological apparatus.

In the case of Egypt, what are normally considered societal movements, in promoting revisionist security discourses, helped to underpin an otherwise brittle authoritarian regime aligned with the US. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood was useful to the state precisely because of its system dissatisfaction. Islamist discourse opposed US imperialist domination and the presence of the state of Israel, and attracted mass support in large part on that basis. It was instrumental in preventing the coalescence of more “internationalizing” coalitions from within the Egyptian middle class. The Brotherhood was a pivotal norm entrepreneur within what Mandaville has termed a ‘global umma’,³⁸ contributing in symbolic if not material terms to a host of anti-Western movements. As such, Egyptian state foreign policy was schizophrenic, contributing both to upholding a statist security order and, through its externalization, to revisionist movements that challenged it. Although upholding inter-state peace in the Levant, and helping Saudi Arabia “balance” its rivals in the Gulf, Egypt has done little to dampen regional conflicts on the societal level.

Iran’s historical trajectory was, in some ways, the reverse of that of Egypt. The brittle “statist” regime of the Shah was replaced by a revisionist republic rooted in the country’s most powerful ideological institution, the clergy. Iran’s shunning of Western support in favor of sustaining a regional “axis of refusal”, has been explained in terms of path dependencies related to the dominance of a hard-line faction which imbued Iranian politics with a revisionist identity, even as the state, like Egypt, moved toward a neoliberal-inspired crony capitalist system from the 1990s.³⁹ But Iran’s foreign policy only appears “suboptimal” and path dependent if we neglect the fact that revisionism was integral to the power structure of the Iranian state from 1979. While the Egyptian state’s absorption of the Muslim Brotherhood as part of its ideological apparatus facilitated its external material dependency and “statist” identity, and exclusion of middle-class reform movements, the Iranian state’s embeddedness in the clergy and alignment with external resistance movements like Hizbullah were essential to its survival in the face of more powerful reformist forces.

Until the 1990s, the Iranian regime may have seen its alignment with Hizbullah primarily as a way of “spoiling” US interests in the region, but from the middle of that decade, with the demise of the peace process and the increasingly implacable position of the US, the revisionist alignment became an essential source of ideological power for the conservative regime in the face of threats to its dominance within the state. What has been termed “post-Islamism” emerged as a powerful force in Iranian state and society during the 1990s. The reform movement, coalescing around the presidency of Muhammad Khatami in 1997, embraced many aspects of liberal world order, statism, and democracy. It embodied a shift, in Acharya’s terms, from norm subsidiarity to norm localization, or from revisionism toward embracing the international status quo. Norm localization around post-Islamism threatened to erode the conservative faction’s hegemony by establishing relations with the US and moving Iran out of the revisionist orbit. Domestic self-preservation imperatives of the Iranian regime spurred its alignments with Hizbullah, Hamas, and Syria. The so-called Axis of Refusal can, in this sense, be viewed as part of the ideological and military apparatus of the Iranian state. The Syrian uprising thus constituted an existential threat to the Iranian regime, which has logically expended considerable effort to preserve the Asad regime.

Egypt also confronted a growing internal reformist threat from the 1990s, but it was far less successful in penetrating the Egyptian state than was its Iranian counterpart. Its progress was blocked not only by the repressive policies of the Mubarak regime but also by the conservatism of the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime’s ideological auxiliary in state and society.⁴⁰ The Egyptian uprising of 2011–13 originated from outside the state, targeting first the Mubarak regime and then the Muslim Brotherhood, but it won marginalized reformist sections of the latter, as well as more revolutionarily inclined Salafi actors, to its side. From the perspective of the military, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political ascent post-2011 compromised its reliability as an ideological auxiliary for the state. In suppressing the revolution and assuming control of the state, the Egyptian military liquidated its erstwhile ideological partner. Egypt’s state is now more domestically brittle, and externally dependent, than ever.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that regional conflicts persist due to states' mutual interests in reproducing particular configurations of domestic, as much as international, power. Societal movements both within and outside of states may constitute allies as much as obstacles in this endeavor and be considered analytically to belong to the state and its foreign policy apparatus. It has reviewed a range of IR theoretical approaches to regional dynamics and concluded that a central conceptual shortcoming has been a narrow and shallow definition of the state. Historical sociology offers a clearer picture of regional conflict by bringing together state, society, regional, and international levels. The chapter briefly outlined the utility of this approach by examining the foreign policy trajectories of two pivotal states, Egypt and Iran. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood became part of the state's ideological state apparatus, helping to externalize domestic opposition. It contributed to upholding the US security agenda in the region at the cost of helping to fuel regional and global jihadism. In Iran, Islamists constituted the conservative core of the state rather than an adjunct. The regime confronted a more organized state and civil society opposition than was the case in Egypt, one that would be greatly empowered by strengthening of links with the West. As such, alignment with regional resistance movements became integral to the structure of power in Iran.

Notes

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- 6 Ibid., 46.
- 7 Christian Reus-Smit, “The Idea of History and History with Ideas,” in Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson, eds. *Historical Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 123 (check page) .
- 8 Steven R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1 January 1991): 249.
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- 19** Etel Solingen, *Comparative Regionalism: Economics and Security* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 6.
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- 34** Ibid., 103.
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